

Let's Get Them Out of the Country! Reflecting On the Value of International Immersion Experiences for MPA Students

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ABSTRACT

Public affairs education is beginning to reflect the increasing internationalization of the field. While many of our professors are experienced teachers of international and intercultural content, most of our programs are just starting to provide international immersion experiences. Crafting those opportunities in ways that are accessible to typical graduate students is a monumental, but rewarding, task.

LET'S GET THEM OUT OF THE COUNTRY!

Throughout the past few years, public affairs educators have debated how to “spark discussions of diversity and promote cultural competencies among [our] students” (Ryan, 2007/2008, p. 487). We have criticized gaps in the curriculum (Hewins-Mahoney & Williams, 2007; Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2008) and explored the potential of our classrooms to serve as innovation incubators and consulting labs (e.g., Mason, 2008; Waldner & Hunter, 2008). We have grappled with the issue of how to train public sector leaders who are capable of providing efficient, ethical, and empathetic service to culturally, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse communities (see Alvarez & Timney, 2008; Brintnall, 2008; Revell, 2008; Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2008). For many of us, these discussions repeatedly have ended with the realization that our students need more intercultural education.

For public affairs students to succeed in the global public sector, they must recognize the influence of culture — especially their own — on the ways that communities, workplaces, and societies operate. Scholars have called this an awareness of “backstage” cultural paradigms, those that dictate “*why* certain practices and communication behaviors carry certain significance” (Cheney,

2001, p. 94; Varner, 2001). A number of studies have documented that U.S.-educated students tend to recognize the influence of culture on organizational praxis only when it is “foreign,” or different from seemingly universal norms (Keshishian, 2005; See also, Keshishian, 2003). Students begin to question these assumptions while working through international case studies and intercultural examples, but U.S.-based instruction does not fully problematize domestic students’ beliefs. Despite the best classroom efforts, nothing seems to succeed as well as in-person experiences of other places and cultures. Future administrators benefit greatly from non-U.S. experience. We need to get them off campus and out of the country!

Though faculty and staff continually dream up new ways to infuse their programs with intercultural experiences (see Driskill, 2007; Garies, 2005; Wilkinson, 2006), most higher education professionals agree that an immersive international experience is the best way for students to gain appreciation for the cultural dimensions of administration (Cheney, 2001). However, we know that many obstacles prevent students from studying abroad, engaging in international field research, and completing extra-national internships. While international immersion programming continually has improved, fewer than 3 percent of U.S. *undergraduates* study abroad each year (Cushner & Karim, 2003). Due to additional constraints faced by MPA candidates (e.g., many are working professionals), the percentage who engage in work/study abroad is likely to be lower. Additionally, because financial support has been shrinking (e.g., decreased Fullbright funding), many students view less-expensive, short-term experiences (e.g., those lasting three weeks) as the only viable immersion option. Short-term experiences do not always have the full desired impact, because students are not away from home long enough to absorb and process information about the new location and its local cultures (Cushner & Karim, 2003). Noting these trends, educators have a two-fold challenge: (a) To craft programming that is appealing enough to warrant financial and personal sacrifice, and (b) to provide meaningful, short-term, immersion experiences.

Crafting Immersion Programming that Appeals to Students

Conventional wisdom suggests that students pursue international immersion experiences for mostly instrumental reasons, such as resume-building, academic advancement, or professional development. However, recent research — conducted almost solely with undergraduate populations — has revealed that academic and career concerns minimally influence students’ decisions to participate in international immersion programs (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Marcotte, Desroches, & Poupart, 2007). Typically, students pursue extra-national experiences because they already possess language skills, intercultural competencies, and a minimum level of comfort in interacting with people of different backgrounds (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Marcotte et al., 2007). Using both longitudinal and post-graduation, retrospective data, researchers have demonstrated

that undergraduate students with positive impressions of international immersion programs and low levels of ethnocentrism are most likely to sign up for study-abroad experiences (Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Marcotte et al., 2007). Although such students retrospectively report personal and career growth, they do not fully anticipate these benefits prior to traveling abroad (Marcotte et al., 2007).

Because students do not clearly perceive the instrumental benefits to immersion experiences, there is little reason for reticent or culturally isolated students to risk uncertainty by studying abroad. This leaves educators in a bind: The students who are likely to benefit the most from immersion experiences are the least likely to sign up, and the arguments that might compel them to do this (e.g., resume-building) do not resonate with the students who are *most* likely to pursue international experiences. Solving this problem requires a great deal of student outreach. To reach the students who currently shy away from international experiences, we must present compelling arguments that address both the safety and the resume-building advantages of international experiences. For MPA candidates, the messages must be clearly and forcefully articulated. Examples could include: “There is no substitute for international experience if you plan to serve international constituents” and “there are certain organizations (e.g., the United Nations) unlikely to hire you without international experience.” Concomitantly, we must design programming that helps students develop as administrators while they are abroad, even if that experience is only a few weeks long.

Providing Meaningful Short-Term Immersion Experiences

If we are to recruit students with the promise of career-altering, international immersion, we must be sure that our programming actually will deliver on that promise. I faced this challenge firsthand when I designed immersion experiences in Eastern Europe and Central Africa. Fortunately, I discovered a vast body of literature on intercultural exchange, studying abroad, and international internships. Though scholars have observed many variables related to student recruitment, retention, and success in immersion programming, much of the literature seems to suggest that quality programming features four elements:

1. Extensive pre-experience training focused on improving requisite skills, plus intercultural awareness, empathy, and capacities (Chapel, 1998; Goldstein & Kim, 2006; Ryan, 2007/2008).
2. Career-related, in-country activities, assignments, and responsibilities (Adler & Loughrin-Sacco, 2003; and see Connor et al., 1997).
3. Effective in-country mentoring and support (Feldman, Folks, & Turnley, 1999).
4. Post-experience reporting — particularly oral presentations — to foster communication and leadership skills, and to facilitate psycho-social processing (Chapel, 1998).

In essence, effective immersion programs must assist students to prepare for, participate in, and make sense of meaningful international experiences. While in-country, students should undertake research-data collection, engage in professional shadowing, or otherwise experience the public sector of another country. Because most students need time to process their experiences once they have returned home, effective post-experience reporting must be extensive and of a substantial duration when possible (e.g., 6-9 months). Final post-experience reporting should be self-facing, and should require students to confront their own cultures. Self-facing reflection often reveals the falsity of the “culturelessness” felt by many U.S. students (Devoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002). This realization is perhaps the most important step in their development as competent, intercultural administrators. Once a student realizes that his or her home culture is not neutral or universal, alternate forms of organizing, managing, and mediating conflict become rational options, and colleagues with different perspectives become important sources of information.

CONCLUSION: THE BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCES FOR MPA STUDENTS

Intercultural competencies and experiences are critical for the next generation of public administrators. Their workplaces and client bases will be neither homogeneous nor static (Rogers, 2003). Public affairs professionals must be prepared to respectfully consider divergent ideas and viewpoints. Even though our students often understand that the profession is changing, they do not always connect international experience with career development. Perhaps this is because we have yet to connect the dots for them. My experiences with taking students to Central Africa and Eastern Europe have shown me that engaging students in meaningful in-country work facilitates their growth as empathetic and intellectually rigorous service providers. Crafting these immersion experiences is a monumental but immensely rewarding task — something I wish for all of my colleagues and many, many of our students to experience.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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